

1 If you were to introduce yourself with the simple statement, “I am (blank),” what would you say? When Jesus did so in the Gospel of John, it was one way of revealing to the disciples, to the crowds, and to us, who he was. We’re continuing our worship series this morning, focusing on these names claimed by Jesus, each of them an invitation to discover more of who Jesus is by walking closely with him in a love relationship each day.

2 Do any of you have grape vines growing on your property? I’ve never grown grape vines, but I once owned property in Kentucky that included poison ivy vines on the adjacent vacant lot. They had a nasty habit of creeping over into our lot. Have you ever gotten a poison ivy rash that spreads over your entire body? Put that one on your bucket list of experiences you’d rather never have. The itching is unbearable, and the spreading of the rash is unstoppable. It took two of those episodes for me to decide that it was time to do some extreme pruning of the poison ivy on the empty lot. Pruning poison ivy is a little tricky because it only takes a small amount of the oil to be transmitted from the leaves to clothes or tools to skin to begin the awful poison ivy rash. I know that it wasn’t ecologically sound, but I will say that razing Round Up on the poison ivy vine did put an end my recurring rashes.

Pruning desirable plants, real pruning, is considerably more complicated, especially in a landscape that includes diverse plants. I know that lilac bushes are supposed to be pruned immediately after they flower and trees generally in the winter, but each plant seems to require different techniques and timing. I’m sure I’m not the only homeowner who was keen on planting but not so skilled at caring for the plants over their lifetime. As we consider our next name for Jesus, the True Vine, we can be glad that Jesus hasn’t left the vine in the hands of a weekend gardener like me. Rather, it’s the Holy One who tends the vine and directs the pruning, all for the ultimate end of glorifying God. We continue our reading from John 15 now, as Jesus makes clear exactly what fruit we are to bear. I’m continuing in verse 9 in the New Living Translation.

{Read John 15:9-17 (NLT)}.

3 So let’s get as clear as we can be about this metaphor Jesus is using and then see what we can learn from it. There are four main “characters” in this metaphor: The vine (that’s the roots and the thick trunk in this picture); the branches (the smaller, thinner ends of

each vine, including what's called the "cane" in this diagram, as well as the leaves); the grapes, or more generically, the fruit; and the gardener. Jesus is the vine, we are the branches, the fruit is something we're expected to produce in our lives, and God (whom Jesus calls his Father) is the gardener. Got that? Everything we need to learn from this metaphor concerns the interrelationships among the vine, the branches, the fruit, and the gardener.

4 Let's start with the relationship between the vine and the gardener. Jesus calls himself the "true vine." That might suggest to you that there have been false vines, sort of like the poison ivy plants of our spiritual heritage. And if you thought that, you'd be right. In the Old Testament writings, Israel was compared to a vine or a vineyard that God planted through Abraham.¹ Remember, when the Bible talks about Israel, it's not a prophecy of the modern geopolitical country of Israel, but the descendants of Abraham, through his son Isaac and his son Jacob, who was later given the name of Israel. The original vine, Israel, was a people, the branch of Abraham, who were called to go and bring God's blessing to all people. But something went wrong with Israel. With each season of growth, Israel began to take on a shape that was displeasing to God and contrary to the purpose of the plant, which was to produce fruit that glorified God and blessed all people. Instead of becoming a blessing to all people, Israel took on the diseases of the people they came into contact with, worshipping idols and false gods. Forty years in Egyptian captivity and the giving of new commandments through Moses weren't enough to save the original vine, and so the Gardner uprooted it, destroying Jerusalem and sending Israel off into captivity. That's the story of most of the Old Testament, the story of how God planted Israel, and then uprooted Israel when it failed to produce fruit. I thank God for that heritage, even the uprooting, because in the place of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we have a better vine to cling to: Jesus Christ.

5 If Jesus is the True Vine, the vine that will never be uprooted, the vine that will always bear fruit, then the branches of the vine are the disciples of Jesus. Frequently in the Gospels we hear Jesus trying to reorient the Jews to the reality of the new vine. God's blessing is no longer inherited from Abraham or any other parent. It comes through being a

¹ See Isaiah 5:1-7, Psalm 80:8-16, Ezekiel 15:1-14, Hosea 10:1, Jeremiah 2:21

living branch of the True Vine, Jesus.

Three times Jesus tells us in this passage that we are to remain, abide, or dwell. The sense of the command is that it's to be ongoing, not occasional. Branches aren't attached to a vine on Sunday morning and then detached for the remainder of the week, like a plastic Lego model. Jesus makes us two promises. The first promise is that if we live in vital, intimate relationship with Him, He will live in vital, intimate relationship with us. "Remain in me and I will remain in you."² And the second promise is that such a relationship will be productive, with tangible and valuable results. "Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit."³ And just in case we don't know this already, Jesus clarifies that above all else, this relationship and the fruit it bears is characterized by love. The vital nutrients feeding the vine of Israel were ancestry and obedience. The lifeblood of the vine of Jesus is love.

6 So what might it look like to remain, or abide in Christ? Certainly it means that every day we intentionally incline our hearts toward Jesus. For some of us, abiding comes most naturally through morning prayer or a Bible devotional. For others of us, we receive our vital connection with Christ by spending time with our Sisters and Brothers in the faith. For others, it's in serving others that we feel closest to Jesus. John Wesley prescribed what he called the "means of grace" for abiding in Christ, a far ranging scope of practices that embrace the full gamut of the varied ways God made us: Reading, studying the Scriptures, prayer, fasting, attending worship, healthy living, sharing our faith with others, sharing in the Sacraments, Christian accountability, visiting the sick and imprisoned, feeding the hungry, giving generously to alleviate the needs of others, seeking justice, ending discrimination, and fighting systemic poverty.⁴ No single person can abide in all those ways. Find at least one way, or one new way, and abide in Jesus, remembering that ultimately we abide for the purpose of bearing the fruit of love. "This is my commandment:" (Jesus said) "Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends."

² John 15:4, NLT (2nd Ed.)

³ John 15:5, Ibid

⁴ <http://www.umc.org/how-we-serve/the-wesleyan-means-of-grace>

7 Let's come back to the business of pruning. It's a very strange fact that pruning stimulates growth, and proper pruning leads to the production of more and better fruit. That's why pruning your bushes heavily in late fall is generally a bad idea in Minnesota. There will be all sorts of new growth that won't have time to harden properly before winter. But if we tend to over-prune our bushes, my guess is that most of us would rather have under-pruned lives. One of the hard truths of the vine metaphor is that divine pruning is not optional. Did you notice that? Jesus allows for only two options. The branches that don't produce fruit are pruned the hard way, cut off by the gardener and burned, not because God is vindictive, but because a dead branch interferes with the health of the vine.

And the fruitful branches? They're also pruned so that they'll produce even more fruit! Pruning is not optional. Either we live vitally connected to the True Vine, Jesus, and allow God to regularly prune out the old growth that is limited the fruit of love in our lives, or we resign ourselves to become deadwood, biding our time until God takes out the pruning saw and severs us from the vine for eternity.

What's the pruning that God may be doing in your life in these days? Is there some thinning out that needs to happen in your life to allow the light of God's grace to filter in? Are there some suckers that are growing in your life that are sapping your vitality? Do you have some damaged wood that simply needs to be cut out of your life to make room for new growth? The good news is that even though God's pruning can be painful, abiding in the True Vine, Jesus, is joyful.

The more fully we learn to lean into our dependence on Jesus, the more freely we'll receive the life-giving love of the True Vine. The stronger our branch is connected to the True Vine, the more freely we'll be able to share that love with other people. And that, after all, is our purpose. We were created, each one of us, to glorify God by bearing the fruit of the love of Jesus in our lives. I want to do more of that. Don't you?



Buffalo United Methodist Church



...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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